

Indy's Last

By William T. Baker

When I joined Independence (CV 62) for her final operational cruise, I realized that I would be witnessing the end of an era. Today, looking back on my experiences I wish to honor the events and people who defined Independence and the Navy's presence in Japan.

Photo by Mark Wertheimer



Below, Sailors line *Indy's* deck as she leaves her home port of Yokosuka, Japan for the last time on 7 July 1998. Left, the author accompanied the carrier on her final cruise to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

This is not a history chronicling *Indy's* 39 years of service to the Navy and the nation (see history, p. 12). It is a tribute to not only the last men and women assigned aboard *Independence*, but all Sailors who proudly served on "Freedom's Flagship" from her commissioning on 10 January 1959 to her decommissioning on 30 September 1998.

On 7 July 1998, *Independence* prepared to depart for the final time from her home port in Yokosuka, Japan, where she had been home-ported since September 1991. The gray haze blurring the distinction between water and sky seemed appropriate and captured the mood. Captain Mark Milliken, CV 62's last CO, characterized her departure as "a sad day for *Indy* Sailors." He encouraged those at the ceremony to "support and welcome *Kitty Hawk* [CV 63] as you

have *Midway* [CV 41] and *Indy*." The ceremony ended with the unfurling of the "Going Home" banner, and the command to man the rails.

The significant cultural ties that developed from the U.S. presence in Japan were apparent during the cruise. Shortly after reaching the open sea, *Independence* performed an underway memorial service and burial at sea for Masuoka Ichiro. A career Japanese government official known as "Mr. Navy," he had focused on naval affairs between the United States and Japan and had long supported the continued partnership of the two navies. In tribute, Rear Admiral Timothy J. Keating, Commander Carrier Task Force 70, praised his "enthusiastic and tireless support of the U.S. Navy whose efforts, more than any other single individual, ensured the close cooperation between the United States and Japan and led to the continuous carrier



battle group presence in Japan since 1973." The admiral added that as had *Midway* and *Independence*, *Kitty Hawk* would benefit from Ichiro's vision of continued cooperation while

cruise



“his legacy of support of the U.S. Navy carries on in his memory.”

During transit to Pearl Harbor, flight operations began each day as they would at any other time, with a foreign object damage walkdown. But as the day ended on 15 July, *Indy* had conducted flight ops for the final time. The last day of flying generated eerie feelings of anticipation and anticlimax as crew members watched from vulture’s row or gathered on the flight deck.

An E-2C *Hawkeye* from Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 115—carrying *Indy*’s skipper and Capt. Richard O. McHarg, Commander Carrier Air Wing 5—launched, recovered and then launched again to circle the ship while other aircraft headed for *Kitty Hawk* and the beach. In what seemed a surreal moment, “Liberty 601” turned on final, caught the 3-wire and executed *Indy*’s final trap.

Pearl Harbor provided a fitting historical backdrop for CV 62’s farewell on 17

July. Slowly steaming toward her mooring, *Indy* sailed past *Missouri* (BB 63) and *Arizona* (BB 39)—reminders of the Navy’s rich heritage and symbols of the tragic beginning and triumphant end of the Second World War. As *Independence* turned

over the forward-deployed duties to *Kitty Hawk* on the 18th, some observers felt mixed emotions. Lieutenant Chris Erickson, an S-3B *Viking* pilot with Sea Control Squadron 21, described the experience as “bittersweet.” He was excited but at the same time “really sad to see *Indy* take off.”

Perhaps best summing up the feelings of all those who served aboard CV 62, AM1 Robert Cook of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron 5 mused, “Leaving *Independence* is like leaving an old friend.” I can think of no greater tribute. ✈

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Photos by Todd Baker

Top, *Independence* wishes her old home port goodbye with Sailors spelling out “sayonara” on the flight deck. Above, *Indy*’s skipper and the air wing CO make the carrier’s last trap and catapult. Right, *Indy* personnel stand at attention as the carrier passes the *Arizona* memorial upon entering Pearl Harbor.

